

## **Mary's Mushroom Egg**

**Sam and Bruce – 05.24.19**

This is a story about Mary, started by Mary, and finished for Mary by her grandfather, Carl Coon. Completed December 1, 1985.

The story begins a while ago when they still had geese on Mary's farm. Mary had tried to be friends with the geese but found it a thankless job, because they were a nasty and unfriendly lot, on the whole.

On the particular summer day when this story begins, Mary was being even nicer than usual, but the geese were even horrider than usual. In fact, the gander attacked Mary and drove her into the woods behind the barn. Mary's father was running the tractor in the high pasture and Mary's mother had gone to Danbury town for something so there was no-one around to help her except David, and he was too little. Anyway, she found herself wandering around in a part of the woods where the trees were quite big and there was little underbrush. She startled a rabbit and watched it bounce away. A crow high in the tree above her complained noisily about her intrusion. Other birds were less concerned and chattered lazily to each other.

You probably already have some idea about what happened next, from the title. Mary found an enormous mushroom growing out of the ground just north of the trunk of the biggest tree around. It was a big smooth brown hemisphere with stripes that almost seemed to form letters and a message. Mary was still pretty small and could not read very well, but the stripes on the mushroom seemed to spell something like "Pick Me". So she did. And was she ever surprised!

As she turned the mushroom over in her hand it began to crumble, and she could feel something round and hard inside. Pretty soon it fell away entirely and left behind, you guessed it, a large smooth white egg about the size of a goose egg.

"You are a fine and beautiful egg," said Mary, half aloud. To her considerable surprise, the egg replied, quite audibly, "Thank you. You are a beautiful little girl. We shall see how fine you are in due course." Mary turned the egg over and over but found nothing but a smooth surface all around. "How is it you can talk?" she asked. "I am a special egg," replied the egg. "There are various reasons why I am here. One of them is to spread the word that people should speak more exactly by not saying exactly when someone else says something that is not exact just because that person happens to agree." Mary was a mite confused by this and said "Is it because of all this eggsactly business that someone decided that eggs should act and that you should be

sent to take the lead?" "No," replied the egg, "That is not at all exact nor is it the way eggs act. Try again."

"Well," said Mary, "I don't know what to make of that, not exactly anyway, but I do know that this is the first time an egg ever talked to me, and that is exact. So, will you please tell me more about yourself."

The egg replied as follows: "I belong to a world that is like yours, except that geese are in charge, not people. In that world I am the only egg endowed with magical properties, one of which is that I never get old. I have been with the geese that rule that world for as far back as anyone can remember and much farther. I am something of an oracle. Important geese ask me questions, and I reply precisely, in ways which will be good for all goosedom--unlike oracles in your world, who, I understand, tend to speak with the exact opposite of precision, to cover up their ignorance. Goose philosophers argue endlessly about whether I am the Original Creation of the Original Goose, or whether I am in fact the Original Creator of the Original Goose--or at least its twin, since only a few dedicated eggists maintain that I could have created the Original Goose myself, and still retained my present form. In sum, while I do not wish to exaggerate, I think it is accurate to say that I am both a Singular and an Important Egg".

"Gracious Sakes!" said Mary, "That is very special! But how did you get here, and why?"

"I'll not try to explain how I got here," said the Egg. "You don't need to know and couldn't understand even if I did explain. As to why I am here, a situation has developed in which I need the help of a human. It seems that you have been selected, or have selected yourself, to be that person. I hope you are strong".

Mary said bravely, "I am not very strong, but I shall do my best to protect you, and prevent ignorant people from boiling you, or poaching or scrambling or frying you, or perhaps making you into an omelet!"

"That is not the problem", the egg said thoughtfully, "for you see, we are no longer in your world, we are already back in mine."

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Mary looked up and around, and indeed, everything was subtly different: the trees, the sounds of the birds, the angle of the sun and the quality of its light. She stood up and felt lighter and somehow exhilarated. She picked up the egg and held it tightly in both hands, for reassurance.

"Don't squeeze too hard," warned the egg, "I am immortal but not unbreakable".

Mary relaxed her grip a bit and held the egg up so she could speak to it without looking down. "What, exactly, do we do next?" she asked. The egg's reply was startling, and scary.

"You must follow my instructions **exactly!** As long as you have me with you, you cannot be physically harmed, unless the Goose-King invokes the Great Goose Goblin. That would be a very drastic step, with consequences that no one could foresee with precision, so it will not happen, **unless** the Goose-King discovers that I, the immortal egg, am with you. Then, and only then, he might become desperate enough to summon the Great Goblin. It follows that you must keep me hidden in your pocket whenever it is even remotely possible that you are being seen or overheard, and take me out to talk to me only when you are **absolutely** sure of your privacy. Always remember that your immunity from harm will make them suspicious, and that they are a devious lot."

"Who are 'they'," asked Mary.

"'They' are the Goose-King and his court, who rule all the civilized or domesticated portion of the Goose World. Only the Wild Geese lie outside their domain. There is a constant struggle between the world of the Goose-King and the domain of the Wild Geese."

"Which side are you on?" asked Mary.

"I represent all geese, and the future of Goosedom. Mary, you will have to decide for yourself which side you are on, if any. And that is another reason for you to keep me concealed in your pocket during at least the first episodes of the adventure we face. I want you to decide for yourself what is right and what is wrong about modern-day goosedom, and not rely at every turn on my advice and judgement. You are an outside observer, entering our world with no prior knowledge or partisan interests. You, and only you, shall decide the future of our race."

"What an awful responsibility," Mary thought to herself, "I'm glad it's just geese and not people". And off she went through the forest.

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Pretty soon the woods gave way to rolling fields, but not the ones Mary had left on her farm. The hills were not as high for one thing, so Mary could see farther, and

in the distance, in almost all directions, lay a series of swampy marshes and lowlands. Mary surveyed this scene from the edge of the woods, and decided it would be safe to consult the Egg one more time, as it was unlikely she had yet been seen. So, she took the mysterious being once more from her pocket.

"Where do you think I ought to go now?" she asked.

"Go straight ahead for about a mile on the fields," said the Egg, "until the fields end at the juncture between two streams. That will bring you to Featherton, an important commercial center. I dare say people will find you there soon enough, for you are indeed a curious sight in this world. You will be well advised to give them an explanation that is as close to the truth as you can without revealing my presence. The truth is always better than a made-up story, you see, in situations like this because you only have to remember one version of the facts and you are less likely to get mixed up and contradict what you said before. So, tell them you are a human from another world and you got lost and found yourself in this one and you don't know how you got here and can someone please help. Then keep your eyes open and observe."

"But first", continued the Egg. "There is a trick you should know. If some of my people should become very threatening and seek to do you harm, hold up your right hand in a fist, with your index finger and your little finger sticking out and pointing at your enemy, and say in a loud voice, 'Aroint'. This is powerful magic in this world, denied to mortal geese because they lack fists and fingers. Some leaders carry carved fists when they go to war, but they do not work very well because they are copies not originals, and in any case, it is awkward for a fighting goose to have to carry such objects. So, this knowledge should give you a considerable advantage."

Mary thanked the Egg for this advice and set forth. The grass on the fields was knee high and full of yellow and blue flowers. After she climbed the second little hillock, she could see ahead to the confluence of the two streams, but at first, she could see no sign of a town. As she got nearer, however, she realized that what she had taken for reeds along the stream were in reality a series of low straw houses, and soon she could see a few large geese walking around among them. Pretty soon one of them saw her as well, and honked in astonishment. Other geese came waddling up and Mary found herself surrounded.

"What on earth are you," said the first goose, "and why?"

"I am Mary," said Mary. "I am a human being from America, and I don't know where I am, and I don't know how I got here, and if you can arrange to send me back to where I came from, that will be quite all right with me, thank you very much."

"A human being from America!" said the goose. "I never heard of such a thing!"

An old goose, rather ragged in the pinfeather department, spoke up. "I once heard that America is where we get our hair from... you should know, Mary, that hair is a very prized and rare commodity in our land. The richest among us use it to stuff their pillows. It is a great status symbol. And it comes from America by magic. I have not heard of human beings. The hair comes from something called barberryships, or something like that."

"Oh," said Mary. (She had been about to point out that her own beautiful long blonde tresses were hair too, but thought better of it). "Well, what should I do now?"

The geese began to argue amongst themselves, and while Mary could understand what they were saying, they were saying it with honks and hisses and all manner of goosetalk, which as anyone who has been with geese knows, can be pretty noisy. Mary finally put her hands over her ears and shouted "Stop it, stop it at once!" And they did. Mary, thinking of something she had seen or heard or read some other place and time, said, "Take me to your leader." And they all said, "Of course, why not, the very thing, why didn't we think of that," and so forth.

Mary soon ascertained that the "leader" was in fact none other than the Goose-King the Egg had told her about. He lived in a palace in the center of Goosedom's capital, Goose City, which was several dozen miles away, across swamps and rivers and lakes and a few fields like the ones Mary had just walked across. When Mary pointed out that she could not fly, the geese decided to report to the authorities at the capital that she had appeared, and to suggest that in view of her singularity, a chariot ride was justified. The authorities evidently agreed. After a few hours the chariot arrived from the capital to pick her up. It consisted of a kind of straw basket attached by ropes and sticks to twenty carrier geese, big sturdy birds of a distinctly grayer coloration than the geese Mary had been dealing with, who were mostly white. A somewhat chubby white goose, who introduced himself as the Chief of Protocol at the Palace, was riding in the basket when it arrived. He was a little put out on arrival to find Mary as big as she was, because it meant that he would have to fly back under his own wing-power while Mary rode in the basket, and he clearly felt that this was beneath his status. But there was nothing to be done about it, so he helped Mary into the basket after she said goodbye to the geese of Featherton, and off they went to Goose City. It was quite a ride, and Mary got dizzy looking down at the swamps and lakes and rivers far below, so much so that she soon decided not to look down at all.

It was a sensible choice, and she was in fine fettle when the chariot landed on an expansive lawn on the edge of the palace grounds.

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The Chief of Protocol helped Mary out of her chariot and led her toward the palace, rather slowly since his legs were short. On the way he gave her various instructions.

"You should be honored," he said, "that His Majesty has agreed to receive you. This is a sign of His great interest in the world around him, a feature which makes Him a most benevolent and gracious monarch. It will do no harm, to let Him have some inkling that you share the respect, indeed one might even say veneration, with which all his other subjects regard Him."

"Other subjects?" said Mary, "Am I a subject of the Goose King? I just got here, and besides I am an American citizen."

"I have never heard of America," sniffed the Chief of Protocol, "and I doubt whether even His Majesty, in His infinite wisdom, has heard of it either. You are a living creature, however peculiar your appearance, and you are here. That is enough. Lacking any credible evidence of any other status, you are His subject. So, let us get on with what you have to do."

"It is extremely important," the Chief of Protocol continued, "that you behave properly when in His Majesty's presence. First, when you enter the Throne Room, you must stop at the entrance, and bow from the waist, as low as you can. When His Majesty nods, you may advance exactly three paces forward, then stop and bow again. Again, you await his Majesty's nod, then advance three more paces, and so forth until you reach the end of the red carpet leading up to the throne. That is as far as you go. You say nothing until spoken to. Then you answer as courteously and respectfully as you can, always addressing the King as 'Your Majesty'. Do you understand?"

"I guess so," said Mary, "but it seems like a silly way to act to me."

"Mary," said the Chief of Protocol, "don't you think that ever again. The Royal Throne is all-powerful here in Goosedom, and if you are seen to misbehave, or show the slightest disrespect, your very life could be at stake. But think of the matter in positive terms. Anyone lucky enough to have direct relations with His Majesty, has the opportunity to share, at least to some extent, in that all-powerful personage's power, and if he behaves properly some of that power rubs off and that person can exercise power over other geese that are not fortunate enough to have access to the Royal

Personage. That is the way our society works. So, do, do, do be good and do as I have directed."

After they had walked a couple of paces in silence, Mary thinking hard about what she had just heard, the Chief of Protocol continued, a bit diffidently: "You know, Mary, those of us who do get to see the King regularly are a privileged and powerful group, but also a vulnerable one. We need to help each other. You will find that I am in a position to help you on all manner of things, like making sure that the Palace staff gives you comfortable accommodations and suitable food. You in turn can help me, when you meet His Majesty, by pointing out what an excellent impression I have made on you, and how tactfully and efficiently I have done my job."

Mary almost said that she didn't see anything particularly outstanding one way or the other about the job he had done, and it hadn't taken much brains to begin with, but she decided not to. She just nodded and walked on silently. Mary was a pretty outspoken girl most of the time, but something about the egg she was carrying in her pocket made her more cautious. She knew she was on a very important mission and had to be careful, and realized that one of the hardest things in the world to do is to make people forget when you have said the wrong thing.

A scrawny old gander with a long neck approached them from the palace, and the Chief of Protocol introduced Mary to him. He was, it seemed, the Chief Steward of the Royal Household. The three of them, with Mary in the middle, entered the Palace and went through three long high-ceilinged anterooms to the door to the Throne Room. There they paused until the doors were opened from the inside, and entered. Mary stopped just inside, at the near end of a red carpet stretching off to the Royal Throne itself, and bowed from the waist. Meanwhile, the Chief Steward and the Chief of Protocol scabbled off to the sides in a sideways shuffle that kept them facing the Throne. They bobbed up and down as they went in what was apparently a series of bows, and the whole performance was so awkward and ungooselike that Mary almost forgot and laughed. But she didn't, and instead looked at the personage on the Throne, as respectfully as she could.

What she saw could only be described objectively as a rather large but unimposing white goose, with watery eyes and a somewhat vacant look. He wore a crown, however, and a robe of a fabric Mary had never seen before, but guessed it was made out of some kind of hair. He looked at Mary at last and nodded, lazily and almost imperceptibly. Mary advanced three steps and bowed again. The King nodded again, a bit more noticeably, because it was beginning to dawn on Him that Mary was

different, indeed very different, from any of His other subjects, indeed she was remarkable! So, the nearer she approached, the faster and more vigorously He nodded His head, until at last she was almost running and His crown was askew.

"My Goodness," he said, and immediately all his subjects in the room--and there were a dozen or more--bowed so low and vigorously that their bills hit the floor, making a noise like a roll of drums. "Who are you, what are you, and why are you here?"

"Your Majesty, I am Mary," replied Mary, "and I am a human being from America, and I don't know how I got here, I just did."

The King evidently did not know quite how to respond. While he was blinking and staring further at Mary, an imposing middle-aged gander stepped forward and said: "Pardon me, Your Majesty, but as Your First Minister I feel obliged to suggest a note of caution in dealing with this strange creature. We have no knowledge of any continent or country called America, so it may be that she is not telling Your Majesty the truth." (At this horrid thought all the other geese hissed involuntarily). "Furthermore, we have no knowledge of her true intentions, or for that matter her powers. She could have both the will and the capability to do us harm. I recommend therefore, that she be placed in confinement and studied at least until we are sure she is harmless."

"Oh, George," said the King, "You always were a worry wart. Tell me, Mary, are you harmful?"

"No indeed," said Mary, "I don't want to hurt anyone or anything and I am still pretty small and I don't think I could even if I wanted to."

The Chief Steward spoke up: "Your Majesty, we are all once again amazed at your compassion and your benevolent wisdom, which reminds us again how fortunate all Goosedom is to be under your inspired leadership. May I suggest that Mary be accommodated here at the Palace as a Royal guest for the time being, over in the East Wing, and that meanwhile, we consult the most learned professors at the University to ascertain whether there is any knowledge of this species called human or this place called America. I will make myself personally responsible for her comfort and also see to the arrangements for finding out as much about her as we can."

The First Minister spoke up: "Your Majesty, I suggest that I am in a better position than the Chief Steward to arrange for the investigating."

"Oh, all right, all right," said His Majesty a bit petulantly, "Work it all out the way you think best, only unless there is good reason not to, I would like Mary to come to the ball this evening."

That concluded the audience, and Mary went off following the Chief Steward. As soon as they were out of earshot, that official said in a confidential manner, "Mary, it is a good thing for you that you are now in my charge, and no longer in the hands of that good-for-nothing Chief of Protocol. He is a selfish, unscrupulous opportunist who just wanted to use you to advance his position with the King. I'll wager he already has asked you to put in a good word for him with His Majesty."

"Well, yes", said Mary, "he did, as a matter of fact."

"Ah hah", exclaimed the Chief Steward, "Just as I thought," And he added, with a satisfied tone, "and you didn't say a thing for him when you had the chance. Serves him right!"

The palace was organized in an unfamiliar way, being built for geese not people, but as Mary had never been in any palace anywhere it didn't matter much. She was taken to a room with a comfortable bed and given a delicious watercress salad. She declined the other dishes she was offered, such as minnow soup and salamander souffle. Something about the air on this strange planet kept her from feeling very hungry. She had become a bit sleepy, however, and managed an hour's nap.

Shortly after she awoke an elderly gander with spectacles came and talked to her. He was from the University and though he didn't know anything about America, he seemed quite wise and well-informed. Mary talked to him about her family, and life on the farm, and school and how she was learning to read and write. Eventually the Chief Steward came back and said there was no more time, Mary had to clean up and get ready for the ball.

The ball was in an enormous room in a part of the palace Mary hadn't seen before, and it was a glittering spectacle. The ganders all wore vests and displayed their decorations, but they were a poor second in the tonsorial department to their ladies, who had dressed fit to kill, presumably in competition with each other. Ministers and palace officials and ex-ministers and other notables waddled and strutted around in ways that would have been comical if they had been human, but being geese, they struck Mary as hilarious. Grey geese in livery passed trays of drinks and elegant snacks around to all the guests, and many of them partook quite heavily. The Chief Steward definitely belonged to the latter group. "I shall have to ask the Egg," thought Mary, "whether it is exact to say that a stewed steward cannot be an astute steward?"

Mary's arrival caused quite a stir, and almost all heads turned her way. Nevertheless, some geese, particularly among the ladies, had adopted such a bored manner that they would not admit their surprise. "Wow!" said one lady goose to her companion. "Look at what just walked in, go on, just take a gander!" "I already did, my deah, some years back," was her companion's reply. "It was the biggest mistake of my life."

Mary discovered that there is something special about being singular and different at a party where everyone else knows each other. Everyone wanted to talk to her; she was the belle of the ball. Some of the geese, it turned out, were motivated by more than curiosity. The Chief of Protocol wanted to advise her that the Chief Steward was a scoundrel, and she should be on her guard dealing with him. The First Minister wanted to find out more about her and incidentally seized the opportunity to warn her about both the Chief Steward and the Chief of Protocol. The Chief Steward, after absorbing a number of drinks, said quite horrid things to her about the First Minister.

Then a kind of ripple of excitement ran through the glittering assemblage. Geese lowered their voices and then fell silent. Everyone started shuffling to the sides of the room. Royalty was about to arrive! Yes, when everything had quieted down to the point you could hear your own heart beating, the King and Queen entered, preceded and flanked by six elder notables. They proceeded with measured gait toward a dais at the far end of the ballroom, with two thrones on which the royal couple seated themselves. Conversation gradually resumed throughout the room, though in more subdued form than before.

Perhaps a half hour later Mary noticed that the First Minister was summoned away from the ballroom, only to return a few minutes later looking more self-important than ever. He went straight to the King and Queen and whispered something to them. The Queen appeared quite excited by the news. She shot her neck up and screeched: "Bring her here!" It was, clearly, Mary she wanted, and Mary was produced at once, being already there. As Mary bowed respectfully, the Queen reached out with her wing and felt Mary's hair. "They are right," the Queen squawked, "Absolutely right! This is hair."

Pandemonium broke loose. Every goose and gander in the ballroom wanted to feel Mary's fabulous hair, and were restrained only by the strong sense of decorum they had been trained to observe when in the presence of royalty. Finally, the King himself called for order, and the hubbub died down. "Very well", He said, "so Mary's

head is covered with hair. Very nice hair, if I am any judge. I suppose that makes her a national asset, does it not?"

The Queen was obviously in no mood to be guided by her royal spouse. "Indeed, she said, I commend your Majesty's discriminating taste. At least as far as the hair is concerned. It is, put simply, the finest hair that this Kingdom has ever received. I must have it. I cannot, however, agree with you about the rest of Mary, a pretty misshapen and ugly creature, by even the most charitable of judgements. She is no asset except for the hair, and the value of the hair is diminished by its association with the rest of her. I must have the hair. I'll have the hair, the whole hair, and nothing but the hair."

Mary began to cry. "Please," she sobbed. "I'm very attached to my hair. In fact, I am attached to every single hair on my head. I always have been ever since I can remember. Without my hair I just wouldn't be me, I wouldn't recognize me, nobody else would either, they would all think me an ugly little freak!"

"There, there," said the King, "we don't receive guests from abroad and put them up in the palace just to cut off their hair. Noblesse oblige and all that." He looked somewhat timorously at his now-manic spouse. "I'm sure we can work something out, can't we, my dear?" "You, spineless twerp!!" screamed the Queen, while the whole multitude gasped. "I have told you I want the hair and just the hair. Who is running things around here, anyway?????" Then she called to the First Minister: "George, do the needful!" "Yes, Your Majesty," said the First Minister, "it shall be as You wish." And he whistled a peculiar kind of whistle. Soon a couple of large and brawny geese entered the ballroom carrying wicked looking knives in their bills.

Mary's heart sank, and in desperation her hand grasped the egg in her pocket. Its feel reassured her. She noticed that her index and little fingers started to tingle, and suddenly remembered. Out popped her fist from her pocket, with the tingling fingers outstretched, pointed straight at the First Minister. "Aroint!" and His Excellency quivered and shook and shrank down a bit and shuffled away. "Aroint," she said again, this time pointing at the Queen. Her Majesty froze, her bill still open, her face twisted in a grimace of rage and fear. "Aroint," she said a third time, this time pointing at the two big geese who had just come in. They dropped their knives and fled. Mary then addressed the Chief of Protocol: "Do you want me to aroint you too?" "N-No," came the quavering response. "Then get me out of here," said Mary.

The ballroom was even quieter, when Mary and the Chief of Protocol left, than it had been when the King and Queen had come in. All the dignitaries were huddled

around the walls and away from the door, keeping the maximum distance from Mary as she swept out. It was a grand exit. But as she left, even the exhilarating quality of the moment could not keep her from wondering, "What next?"

Suddenly Mary had an idea. "Those geese that pulled the chariot that flew me here, can they speak too, like the rest of you do?" she asked.

"Of course," said the Chief of Protocol. "Why do you ask?"

"Then take me to them, at once," said Mary.

The grey geese were in a stable behind the palace, with the chariot and its gear. They were awake, as geese have very good hearing, and there had been quite an uproar in the Palace. Mary told them what had happened and asked them if they would be willing to fly her to a place where she might find friends able and willing to protect her from the wrath of the Goose Queen. While she was talking the Chief of Protocol slipped away.

The gray geese explained that they were slaves, and that to do what Mary asked would be an act of rebellion punishable by death. Mary replied that she had powerful magic and would do her best to protect them. Could they, would they fly her to the domain of the wild geese? If they would, Mary said, she would do her best to persuade the wild geese to accept them as part of their own group.

As Mary spoke, the gray geese seemed to stand higher and straighter, and to respond with increasing directness and diminishing servility. Perhaps it was the Egg's influence. Perhaps they just needed a leader. Every flock of wild geese has a leader, but these had none--their masters had seen to that. Anyway, whatever the reason, they rapidly came around to Mary's point of view and agreed to do what she wanted. The only problem was that the wild geese had no fixed home, and nobody knew where they were. Mary said she thought she could help on that, once she was airborne. She wasn't sure, but nothing ventured, nothing gained. And the gray geese said they were willing to take their chances with her.

All this discussion proceeded just about as fast as it takes to tell about it, and within minutes the whole group was airborne. It was night, but there was a full moon that reflected on the ponds and lakes below, giving enough illumination to navigate. As soon as she was certain she was alone, Mary took out the egg and asked, "Which way?"

"South-southwest," replied the Egg, without a moment's hesitation, "and well done." "South-southwest!" called Mary to the nearest geese, who took the message

and passed it on. The whole formation--a reverse "V" because of the chariot--shifted course, and headed for unknown regions and new adventures.

After what seemed an interminable time flying in the night, dawn began to break in the east, and Mary forgot her vertigo in the beauty of the unfolding day. Soon it was light enough to make out the features of the land beneath. Once again Mary consulted the Egg.

"We are flying over a swamp that will gradually become a large lake," said the Egg. "There will be an island in the middle of the lake, straight ahead. Land there."

Mary instructed her carrier geese accordingly, and they began a gradual descent. Soon they were over the lake and the island could be seen in the distance. Mary took out the Egg and asked if it had any further advice.

"You will soon be meeting the wild geese," said the Egg. "Look them straight in the eye and deal with them with absolute honesty. Don't try to be clever. And don't use the 'aroint' trick on them, they don't react to it as do the geese you have just been with."

Mary waited for the Egg to say more but it was silent. By this time, they were almost at the island, and she looked with awe at the natural beauty of the scene, illuminated by the first rays of the sun. There appeared to be no structures at all, but the shore was ringed with a band of high rushes growing out of the shallow water. On the edge were a number of gray geese swimming in the water. Suddenly, they noticed Mary's group, and with a great flurry, they all took to the air, honking noisily. Mary's geese found themselves surrounded, and honked back. The wild geese escorted them over the rushes to land at the edge of a hidden pool close to the center of the island. Mary got out of her basket and, standing as straight as she could, waited for the next chapter of her adventure to begin.

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A large and robust gander approached Mary and dipped his head in a kind of salute. "Welcome to our territory," he said. "We don't get many visitors here, but those who do come our way find themselves hospitably received. You are our honored guest. You have had a long journey. Would you like to rest first or to have some breakfast?"

"I'm not very tired," said Mary, "but I am a little hungry. Also, I'm curious to know more about your people. Perhaps we could talk while I eat."

As in Goose City, the menu was a bit of a problem, but Mary settled in the end for wild rice pilaf with watercress. Her hosts were clearly curious about who she was, but their manners forbade them to express their curiosity until their guest had been suitably fed. So, they talked about ordinary matters like the timing of the next migration until Mary had eaten her fill. Then they politely indicated they would like to know more about her and about why she was visiting them.

Mary explained about being a human being from America, which seemed to mean nothing to them. She said she did not know how she had been transported to the goose world, though it was presumably some kind of magic. Then she told them everything that had happened to her in Goose City, and explained that she had fled that awful place, looking for geese who were outside the Goose King's dominion, and who would not feel obliged to return her. She did not, however, mention the magical egg.

"Hey, Honker, what do you think of that?" said one of the geese to another, who appeared to be their leader. "She sure came to the right place, didn't she?"

"Yes, she did, and that troubles me," said Honker. "As a matter of fact, the geese that brought you, Mary, have told us that as soon as they left Goose City you seemed to know exactly where to go. Now, we are not on the best of terms with the Goose King and his army. In fact, we are at war, and our whereabouts is a military secret. I don't like the thought that someone back there in Goose City may have been able to tell you where to find us. What happened? How is it that you knew where we are?"

"All I can say", said Mary, "is that no one in Goose City told me where you were. I did not know myself until after I left. But I am not in a position to tell you how I did find out."

Honker looked severely at Mary. "Unlike the geese in the Goose King's dominion, we wild geese treat our friends well. But we have to know they are our friends. We can be very rough with our enemies, as the Goose King's army has discovered. We have to know why you are really here and how you got here."

"I am no friend of the Goose King", said Mary hotly. "And everything I have told you is the truth. I have made a promise not to tell anyone about a certain something, and I can't explain how I got here without breaking that promise. Now, if you really are honorable geese, give me a chance to rest in private. If you leave me alone for a while, I may figure out a way to answer your question".

"I hope you can," said Honker. "I have to know, for the future of our whole confederacy depends on whether we have the initiative or the Goose-King does. If your story is true, the Goose King has given us yet another reason to attack, for the way his court treated you is abominable, and contrary to all the most sacred rules of goose behavior. But until you tell me the rest of the story, I cannot be certain that the part you have told me is true, and that you are not in fact some kind of enemy agent. And if the enemy knows our location, we must act very soon. So, take your rest, Mary, but be quick about it. You will be guarded, but from a distance."

Mary was taken to a reed hut with a rush bed to lie on. Her guards went outside and closed the door. Mary took the Egg out of her pocket and whispered. "Is it all right, Egg, to ask you now, what I should do next? I am in kind of a pickle I think?"

"Yes", said the Egg, "it is all right to talk to me now. Honker is giving you the privacy he promised. No, you are not in a pickle. Tell Honker that you are in communication with a powerful oracle, and that the oracle told you how to get here after you left Goose City. You need not tell him the oracle is me and I am in your pocket. Tell him only that you cannot communicate with the oracle except when you are alone and have complete privacy. Tell him to put a question to you where he already knows the answer. By your reply, he will know you speak the truth. Tell him that after he is satisfied that your story is exact, he can put one more question to the oracle through you."

Mary left the hut and spoke to Honker as the Egg had told her to. The big gray goose thought for a bit, then said, "Ask your oracle what I told Commander Greenfoot an hour before you arrived." Mary went back into the hut, stayed there for about a minute, and then came back. "You told Commander Greenfoot that he was a fine fighter but he should care more for the welfare of the geese serving under him," said Mary. All the geese around Honker and Mary burst into loud cheers and applause. Honker dipped his head toward Mary in his tribe's traditional salutation. "Very good," he said, "I believe you now. Give me a few minutes to consult with my geese about the second question." And Mary retired to the hut.

In a few minutes, they called Mary out and once again Honker addressed her, this time very seriously. "Mary", he asked, "the most important question, all of us agree, is this: "Is our cause against the Goose King just?" Mary acknowledged the question and returned to her hut.

"What do you think, Mary," asked the Egg? "How would you answer the question? Where is the right and the wrong, in this war between the Goose King's dominions and the wild geese?"

"Well," said Mary, "I don't know these wild geese very well yet, but they stand straighter, and they talk straighter than those creeps at the Goose King's court, and they look you straight in the eye, and they seem to stick up for each other and not say horrid things about each other like the Chief of Protocol and the Chief Steward and the First Minister did. I'd say it's time for a change in the administration, like my mom and dad say back in America before elections."

"So be it," said the Egg. "Tell Honker exactly this: "Justice is time-bound. Your time has come."

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The war was short and relatively painless. With Mary's help, Honker always knew where the enemy forces were, and where the enemy's weakest points were, and how best to pursue the attack. Within a short two weeks, Honker's forces were at the gates of Goose City.

The King and Queen, surrounded by what was left of the Royal Bodyguard, made a desperate last stand in the Palace itself. Finally, even the Royal Bodyguards realized that it was all over and surrendered. Honker stood in the throne room, surrounded by his forces, face to face with the King and the Queen.

"It is the end of a dynasty," wailed His Majesty. "I am the last of the White Goose dynasty that has ruled this land for over four hundred years. How much better to be the first, than the last. I think I am going to cry".

"As a goose, you are indeed the end," said Her Majesty contemptuously. Turning to Honker, she asked, "How is it that your forces always seemed to know where our forces were, if I may ask?"

"We outfought you fair and square," said Honker, "but we did have a little help on the intelligence side from Mary here." And Mary came up through the ranks of the Gray Geese Army.

Mary's appearance seemed to paralyze the King, who just stood there blinking, but it sent the Queen into an absolutely volcanic eruption of bad temper. "You," she hissed, "You, you, you---Hairy Mary!" And then, to the consternation of everyone in the room, she shouted: "Great Goose Goblin, I hereby Invoke Thee!!!!!!!!!!!"

There was a sudden hush as the import of the Queen's malediction sank in. Then there was a kind of rush of air behind the Royal Couple. Finally, a form started to coalesce out of a kind of reddish-brown mist. Unquestionably, it was the Great Goose Goblin!!!!

The atmosphere of fear on fear on fear became almost thick enough to cut with a knife like a cake. A reddish-brown snout became visible, a muzzle with long sharp teeth and a lolling tongue. Little shifty eyes appeared behind the brute's muzzle and then a pair of alert-looking pointed ears. Soon the rest of the beast took form, and all the geese there, even the Queen, and especially the King, gasped with terror. But not Mary. For what Mary saw was a perfectly ordinary brown fox, the kind that her daddy sometimes chased away from the chicken pen.

"Shoo, " cried Mary, "Get out of here at once, you pest! And she advanced menacingly towards the fox, who took one look at her and vanished in a puff of smoke, back to wherever he had come from. For you see, foxes are always afraid of humans, though they adore hunting geese.

Mary thought to herself, "I must ask the Egg if it is exact that they called it the goose goblin because it is always goblin' geese?" But she forgot, and probably just as well, for at that moment a cheer broke loose that almost brought down the roof. All the geese that were there, except for the Queen, who was looking a mite sour, were honking and hissing their approval of the way Mary had routed their ancestral enemy.

And that in a sense was the beginning of another story, the story of the Dynasty of the Gray Geese, which lasted for many generations. Mary produced the Egg at the inauguration of the new regime, (a Goosocracy, one goose one vote, not a monarchy), and it was officially reinstated in its former position as the premier oracle of the land and the most revered Object of Goosedom.

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When all the fuss was over, Mary had a final conversation with her favorite Egg. "Is it true," Mary asked, "that Goosocracy is better than goose monarchy?"

"Not always," said the Egg. "What matters is vitality. When people or things or systems get very old, something younger and more vital comes along and replaces them. Four hundred years ago the White Dynasty was formed by an admirable White Goose Chieftain who rebelled against a corrupt system run by the Black Diamond geese. Several centuries before that the young and vigorous Black Diamond dynasty

took over from an earlier empire and set up a system that was as democratic as could be imagined at that time--but which later degenerated."

"One last question," said Mary, "Why are you an Egg?"

"That is a better question than you realize, Mary", said the Egg softly. "Most g  
Goose Eggs provide for an orderly succession between one generation of geese and the next. My singularity is that I provide for an orderly transition between goose dynasties. I am the Egg of Time, whose time comes infrequently to be sure, but inexorably. In your world, humans reproduce from one generation to the next in a much more laborious and often painful way than we geese do. The same holds true for major changes in human societies. Lacking an oracle like me, to judge when the time is right, and to effect the transition quickly when that time does come, your people are frequently beset by turmoil and suffering that we geese avoid. But that is the way it is on your world."

"Speaking of which," said Mary, "I would rather like to go home now if it is all right with you." "So be it", said the Egg. "Goodbye, Mary, and thank you."

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Mary woke up under the same tree where she had found the mushroom egg. The Egg was gone, of course, but there was still some brown powder on the ground where the mushroom had been. She felt strangely refreshed.

The geese were still waddling around in the path as Mary walked home. The old gander lowered his head and hissed and advanced menacingly. Mary made a fist, with her index and little fingers pointing at it, and exclaimed, "Aroint!". The gander gave her a sideways look, hesitated, and then got out of her way. "It wasn't a totally wasted afternoon," thought Mary, and ran into the kitchen to tell her brother David all about geese.

\*\*\*\*\*THE END\*\*\*\*\*